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THE BARREN GROUND OF NORTHERN CANADA.¹

WHEN Prodicus sought to give a higher ethical value to the story of Heracles, he invented for the youth of Greece the beautiful fable in which the labours of the hero are represented as the result of a deliberate choice of a life of hardships and virtue in preference to one of ease and vice. Englishmen have rarely failed to satisfy this test. Capacity for endurance has long been a leading characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the fact that this race holds to-day so large a proportion of the vacant spaces of the earth is more to be attributed to a certain passion for adventure noticeable in the individual than to any public policy. Mr. Pike is not the first Englishman who, for pure love of adventure, has engaged in an enterprise of which the practical results appeared to be wholly disproportionate to the efforts required. Nor is he the first adventurer who has possessed the necessary literary outfit to present the results of his travels to the public in a becoming form; but his record is "hard to beat," whether we regard the matter or the manner of his narrative.

In the extreme north of Canada there is a triangle of land enclosed by the Arctic Sea, the Mackenzie River, and the Back River. The base of this triangle is formed by the coast line between the mouths of the two rivers, and its apex by the Great Slave Lake. On the shores of this lake the Hudson's Bay Company have two stations, Fort Resolution and Fort Reliance. The district of the lake has long served as a basis for Arctic exploration on the mainland, and the sterile region to the north is full of memories of Hearne, Mackenzie, Franklin, and Back. But although the courses of the two rivers and the outline of the Arctic coast have been made known by the efforts of these heroic adventurers and their successors, the interior country remains still practically unexplored.

During the two years Mr. Pike remained in Northern Canada he made Fort Resolution his headquarters. From this point he undertook frequent excursions into the Barren Ground, in the course of which he endured dangers and hardships sufficient for a lifetime. Mr. Pike's object was different from that of the ordinary arctic explorer. From conversation with the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company, he had heard of "a strange animal, a relic of an earlier age," that was still to be found roaming the Barren Ground. His informants could tell him nothing of the musk-ox, as the animal is named, from personal experience. All that was known had been gathered from the reports of Indians. Once or twice enthusiastic

(1) By Warburton Pike. Macmillan. 1892.

sportsmen had attempted to reach the musk-ox country, but they had been unsuccessful. "To try and penetrate this unknown land, to see the musk-ox, to find out as much as he could about their habits and the habits of the Indians who go in pursuit of them every year," this, Mr. Pike tells us in his preface, was the "sole object" of his journey. Mr. Pike therefore was a sportsman first and an explorer afterwards. In another place he says that his book was written for sportsmen. As a matter of fact the details of caribou (reindeer) and musk-ox hunting, and of the other forms of sport he enjoyed, are given with scientific accuracy and sportsmanlike directness. To many persons these descriptions will, of course, form the chief attraction of the book; but the general reader will regard them rather in the light of necessary evils.

There is another respect in which Mr. Pike's narrative differs from those of Arctic explorers in general. With the exception of Hearne, who explored the coast region a century ago, and who lived with the Indians, the explorers have been assisted by the most capable white men procurable, and provided with scientific outfits in every way complete. The explorers, in a sense, took their civilisation with them. Mr. Pike, like Hearne, decided to trust himself to the Indians, and, as a result of this decision, he saw the life of the hunters of the North-West in a way which no previous explorer had done. It is in this that the great merit of Mr. Pike's work, both from a literary and a scientific point of view, lies. He is able to present us with a series of pictures of an exceedingly interesting phase of life. These scenes of life in the Barren Ground are instinct with reality. It is not too much to say that Mr. Pike's narrative, at its best, is raised to the level of poetic composition—by a simplicity of diction and a directness of aim—akin to the "high seriousness" of "absolute sincerity," which Arnold made the test of the highest poetic excellence.

Altogether Mr. Pike remained, as already stated, for two years in the north-west of Canada. During this period he made three distinct expeditions in search of the musk-ox, and numerous lesser excursions in pursuit of other game. His first expedition was undertaken in the autumn of the year 1889. Although it was very short, it was so far successful that Mr. Pike is able to write:—"September 27th was a red-letter day, marking the death of the first musk-ox." Naturally this first specimen made a great impression on Mr. Pike's mind, and he describes the appearance the animal presented with great precision:—

"In crossing an occasional piece of level ground he walked with a curious rolling motion, probably accounted for by the waving of the long hair on the flanks; this hair reaches almost to the ground, and gives the legs such an exaggerated appearance of shortness that, at first sight, one would declare the animal to be incapable of any rapid motion. The shaggy head was carried

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high, and when he finally pulled up at sight of us, within forty yards, with his neck slightly arched and a gleam of sunshine lighting up the huge white boss formed by the junction of the horns, he presented a most formidable appearance."

This first success was followed up by a winter expedition of five weeks' duration. Mr. Pike then returned to Fort Resolution for Christmas; but in the following summer he made a third expedition to the Barren Ground, in which he was accompanied by Mr. Mac-kinlay, who was in charge of the Fort, and some other white men. In both of these latter expeditions the hunting of the musk-ox and caribou was conducted on a very handsome scale. Satiated by these victories over his "horned foes," late in the autumn of 1890 Mr. Pike formed the intention of crossing the Rockies, and so making his way to the Pacific. It was in carrying out this intention that Mr. Pike met with an experience which threatened to be deeply tragic, and which forms the culminating adventure of the narrative.

For the moment the interest I have felt in the matter of Mr. Pike's book has prevented me from noticing his manner. It is difficult to praise too much the brevity and strength of Mr. Pike's work. There is something Homeric in the directness and simplicity of his style. At the same time, by eschewing the pernicious habit of breaking up the narrative by the insertion of dates, he has avoided making his book a mere diary. I have already mentioned, as constituting, in my opinion, the chief merit of the book, the vivid pictures of hunting life which it contains. These descriptions are admirable. They are not mere exhibitions of skilful word-painting, though they are excellent as such; they reveal a singular capacity to seize and express in words the aspects of a scene that are essentially dramatic. To begin with we will take that in which Mr. Pike looks forth for the first time upon his strange Canaan:—

"We sat down for a smoke at the top of the hill, and took our last view of the Great Slave Lake. Looking southward we could see the far shore and the unknown land beyond rising in terraces to a considerable height, and very similar in appearance to the range we were on. Ahead of us, to the north, lay a broken rocky country sparsely timbered and dotted with lakes, the nearest of which, a couple of miles away, was the end of our portage; a bleak and desolate country, already white with snow, and with a film of ice over the smaller ponds. Three hundred miles in the heart of this wilderness, far beyond the line where timber ceased, lies the land of the musk-ox, to which we were about to force our way, depending entirely on our guns for food and for clothing to withstand the intense cold that would soon be upon us. A pair of hawks hovering overhead furnished the only signs of life, and the outlook was by no means cheerful. As I was sitting on a rock meditating upon these things old King [a half-breed] came up and said: 'Let us finish the portage quickly; it is dinner-time.'"

Mr. Pike has much to say about the half-breed Indians with whom he was so largely associated, and in particular of a certain King Beaulieu (mentioned above), who acted as his chief guide. Of the half-breed in general, Mr. Pike writes: "He is not a nice man to

and with a curious long hair on the the legs such an could declare the head was carried

travel with, as he always keeps a longing eye on his master's possessions, even though he is fully as well equipped himself, and is untrustworthy if you leave anything in his charge. To your face he is fair spoken and humble enough, and to hear him talk you would think he had a certain amount of regard for you; but out of sight the promises are forgotten, and he is devising some scheme to annoy you and get something out of you. The only way to treat him is as you would treat a dog: if you are kind to him he takes it as a sign that you are afraid of him, and acts accordingly." The fact that his relations with these people were, on the whole, amicable says much for Mr. Pike's tact and courage. But the character of these strange beings is relieved at times by a quaint humour and an unexpected sentiment. Even King Beaulieu relents when the moment of actual separation comes, and gives away his own hair-coat and a pair of snow-shoes to the man whom he was even then deserting for no other reason than a senseless jealousy of the Yellow-Knife Indians. When they sat smoking over the camp fire King showed himself curious about the Grand Pays (as he called the outside world) and its ways; but, while listening to all that was said, he held his own views all the same. In particular he refused to believe that the Queen was a greater person than the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. "No," he said; "she may be your Queen, as she gives you everything you want, good rifles and plenty of ammunition, and you say that you eat flour at every meal in your own country. If she were my Queen, surely she would send me sometimes half a sack of flour, a little tea, or perhaps a little sugar, and then I should say she was indeed my Queen." One opinion which he held was ingenious but peculiar. He maintained that the habit of eating three regular meals—eating by the clock instead of by the stomach, as he called it—was much more greedy than gorging when meat was plentiful and starving at other times, as he and his people did. On another occasion, when the party were in great straits for food (a thing which frequently occurred) it is King Beaulieu who gives a touch of grim humour to the scene. They have eaten nothing all day, and so they have passed the evening in smoking and talking of all the good things they had (severally and collectively) ever eaten, while their eyes shone in the firelight "with the brilliancy peculiar to the earlier stages of starvation." Late in the night Mr. Pike awoke and was greeted by King with the remark: "Ah! Monsieur, une fois j'ai goûté le pain avec le beurre; le bon Dieu a fait ces deux choses là exprès pour manger ensemble."

With this picture may be suitably contrasted the scene in camp after the party have emerged from the treeless region on their return from the winter expedition to the Barren Ground. It should be remarked also that the poles of the lodges have all been previously burnt up for firewood.

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"What a glorious camp we had that night! The bright glare of two big fires lit up the snow-laden branches of the dwarf pines till they glittered like so many Christmas-trees; overhead the full moon shone down on us, and every star glowed like a lamp hung in the sky; at times the Northern Lights would flash out, but the brilliancy of the moon seemed too strong for even this wondrous foe to rival. It was pleasant to lie once again on the yielding pine-brush instead of the hard snow, and to stretch one's legs at full length, as we could never stretch them in the lodge; pleasant, too, to look back at the long struggle we had gone through, and to contrast our present condition with that of the last month."

On all points the reader who desires to be informed on the subjects of "portages," "caches," and "lodges," and generally to become acquainted with the rites of hunting in this strange country, is referred to the narrative, but Mr. Pike's last adventure was of so special a character as to be fitly discussed in a paper which is mainly literary in its scope. As regards the question of moral responsibility, Mr. Pike, while frankly admitting that he was guilty of a "stupid act" in attempting to cross the Rockies so late in the year, claims to be acquitted of any errors of judgment in the actual conduct of the expedition which so nearly terminated in his death and that of his four companions.

On December 12th the party were on the banks of the Parsnip river, within forty miles of Fort Macleod and safety. Six weeks before the native guides had passed this very spot on their way from Macleod; and across the river was a certain "high-cut bank of yellow clay, a mark that any one should recognize who had ever seen it before." Yet these same guides now declared that they had never seen the place before in their lives. "These men," Mr. Pike adds, "were a half-breed and an Indian, supposed to be gifted with that extraordinary instinct of finding their way in all circumstances which is denied to the white man." Mr. Pike maintains that he was justified in assuming that native guides would not make such a mistake as this: and most people will agree with him.

The result of the blunder was that the party had to retrace their steps. Struggling against extreme cold, starvation, and fatigue, all five men ultimately succeeded, on December 27th, in reaching an inhabited cabin *alive*. I finish the story in Mr. Pike's words—

"I pushed open the door, and shall never forget the expression of horror that came over the faces of the occupants when they recognized us. We had become used to the hungry eyes and wasted forms, as our misery had come on us gradually, but to a man who had seen us starting out thirty-two days before in full health the change in our appearance must have been terrible. There was no doubt we were very near the point of death."

The narrative of this adventure is most exciting throughout, but the climax is reached when Mr. Pike debates with himself, while a few spoonfuls of flour are boiling for dinner, whether or not he shall put an end to the two guides. Not content with jeopardising the lives of the party, these two greedy wretches had stealthily con-

sumed five pounds of flour which had been given them to carry—exactly one-third of the precious store on which the lives of all five men depended. For this offence, at such a time, of course there was but one punishment. It would be a nice question for the courts to decide, whether Mr. Pike, being in the position of the captain of a ship, would not have been justified in taking this extreme course and putting an end to both of them with the shot gun he carried. As it was he decided on grounds of expediency to let things take their course. On a subsequent occasion Mr. Pike did not scruple to secure obedience by a threat of death. By so doing he saved the life of one of the white members of the party; and both here and elsewhere there is abundant evidence to show that if a less resolute or less skilful man had been in command the whole party must inevitably have perished, or worse. For sheer dramatic force there is nothing in the book to surpass the lines in which Mr. Pike tells how near the five starving men on the Rockies were to re-enacting the tragedy of the *Mignonette's* boat.

“Our situation seemed utterly hopeless as we crouched over the fire that was with difficulty maintained, and apparently the end had come. There was none of the kindly sympathy for companions in misfortune which men who share a common danger should have; a mutual distrust was prevalent; hatred and the wolfish madness of hunger ruled the camp, and to this day I cannot understand how it was that the fatal spark was never struck, and the tragedy of murder and cannibalism enacted on the banks of that ice-bound river without witnesses save the great silent mountains and the God who made them.”

Mr. Pike has not forgotten the Greek canon which requires a certain air of calmness at the close of the drama. The last scene is laid in the centre of civilisation, and as Mr. Pike pens his final sentences in a “fashionable garret” in St. James’s he remembers only the good times, and feels a longing once more “to pitch his lodge at the edge of the Barren Ground, to see the musk-ox standing on the snowdrift and the fat caribou falling to the crack of the rifle, to hear the ptarmigan crowing among the little pines as the sun goes down over a frozen lake and the glory of an Arctic night commences.” Mr. Pike has felt the power of nature in that strange country in a way that is not given to all of us dwellers in cities. In the winter he was oppressed by the “deathly stillness” that makes a man “glad to cry aloud to break the awful spell of solitude”; and in summer he knew the strange beauty that made Sal-tatha, the Indian, ask of the priest who told him of heaven, “Is it more beautiful than the country of the musk-ox in summer, when sometimes the mist blows over the lakes, and sometimes the water is blue, and the loons cry very often”? His is no mere bowing acquaintance with nature, but an intimate friendship; and it is to this that the special quality of his work is due.

W. BASIL WORSFOLD.

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